DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 179 109 FL 010 843

AUTHOR Hicks, Diana; Murphy, Dermot
TITLE Simulation Procedures in Remedial Work.
INSTITUTION Lancaster Univ. (England). Inst. for English Language Education.
PUB DATE Feb 79
NOTE 11p.; Best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Communicative Competence (Languages); *English (Second Language); Language Attitudes; *Language Instruction; *Remedial Instruction; Role Playing; *Second Language Learning; *Simulation; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The experience of two teachers of English as a second language (ESL) in using simulation is described. Their success in developing communicative competence in young adult remedial ESL students is attributed to the fostering of realistic (i.e., lowered) self-expectations of achievable communicative ability. In developing specific language skills to meet specific needs, it was found that simulations, in which the student is allowed to maintain his/her own identity in a classroom task-completion situation, are more effective than role-playing situations in maintaining student interest and involvement. The success of simulation, however, is seen as depending on the ability of the teacher to project confidence in the usefulness of each task. (JB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

FL 010 843

ED179109

Simulation Procedures in Remedial Work

Diana Hicks and Dermot Murphy

Institute for English Language Education

University of Lancaster, U.K.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Diana Hicks

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

February 1979

Introduction

This paper is based on our experience in using a number of simulation exercises in classes with young adults where our major objective was to help the students develop an awareness of, and confidence in their ability to communicate in spoken English. The objective was decided partly in response to the requirements of an externally imposed syllabus, but also to our own perception of the student's probable needs after completion of the course. We say that this was remedial work because the students all had spent several years studying English in secondary school where oral skills were taught, but were incompletely learned, since the majority of students were unable to participate in a small group interaction. The procedures we have used have been intended to simulate such interaction, and to do so in a manner which we think is qualitatively different from role-play. The examples we will give have been tried in different classes and found to give the necessary stimulation to help students towards fluency in English.

The teaching objective

We have yet to encounter students who, when asked if they would like to be able to speak English fluently, did not say that it was a desirable accomplishment, however many would then add that it was not a possibility for them. If the teacher's aim is to encourage and facilitate language learning, it cannot be achieved in the face of such an attitude. It follows that a preliminary to the classroom work must be a consideration of the nature and source of such beliefs, which are otherwise likely to have a counter-productive effect, unless they are understood and criticised by both teacher and students. Some of such disenchantment with the language learning process seems often to come from

a belief that native speaker competence is the only satisfactory standard to have achieved in a language course; anything less is seen variously as a failure to learn, or lack of aptitude for foreign languages on the part of the student, proof that the language is "difficult", or that the teacher, the methods, the textbooks, and possibly all of them, were in some way inadequate.

We think that for students with a mainly instrumental purpose for learning a foreign language it is useful to specify the target performance for their learning in different terms. Native speaker competence will still be the model for teaching and the standard which some of the learners may nearly attain. To set this as the only acceptable standard presupposes that there is an identity of communicative needs between the foreign learner and the native speaker which is total, and that the standards of phonological, linguistic, discoursal and social competence required for successful communication between individuals, whether foreign or native speakers, are invariant.

As teachers we have found it more useful to think in terms of different levels of communicative competence, and to ensure that our students became aware that their wish to be able to communicate in English can be satisfied with fewer, or more constraints, at standards below the one they originally believed absolute. The constraints they were aware of, were their phonological and linguistic competences, usually without realising that poor standards of performance above a minimum level are greater or lesser impediments to communication, but do not necessarily prevent it. In the words of one of our students: "Why should I improve my accent? I know I make mistakes in grammar, but when I speak, English people understand me all right". He knew that his English could be improved but saw no reason to make the effort. However, he

did want to improve his fluency, by which he meant his ability to participate in interaction in English. Given his standards of pronunciation and grammar we had a majority of students capable of communication rather than a majority unwilling to make the effort to become pseudo-native speakers. What they needed to be taught was fluency.

The remedial element

The tertiary level syllabus to which we were teaching foresaw the need for some remedial work in the traditional terms of a review of the basic structures. Since the students had spent up to nine years already endeavouring to master them, it seemed more important to concentrate on remedying skills that had had much less attention in that time. We wanted our students to develop at least the minimum communicative competence required to take part in social interaction; we saw this ability as dependent on knowledge of the language and certain discoursal and social rules, underpinned by fluency of performance.

With few exceptions, the students already had a minimum knowledge of the language, but, despite an ability to transform active sentences into the passive, were not so good at choosing the voice as appropriate to the context of their utterance. Their grasp of register was undeveloped. They had little or no idea of how to control or to enter an interaction as a participant; the past insistence on absolute standards meant that they were afraid to speak for fear of making a mistake, and unwilling to admit that they had not understood a speaker (whether fellow-student or teacher); they had not learned any of the rules of discourse. Their lack of fluency showed in their inability to keep up in either the speed of encoding or decoding required in small group interaction. It seemed possible to remedy this last weakness through practice,

and the acquisition of fluency was set as a priority. To ensure its development it appeared necessary to build up each student's confidence that he knew enough of the language to communicate. The method chosen to achieve this was the simulations described below, and it is worth emphasising at this point that they were used at the initial stage of the course solely for this objective.

The minimum communicative competence we had established as a goal for the students was the following:

i knowledge of the language appropriate to certain contexts;

ii knowledge of the language sufficiently accurate for communication with a native speaker not to break down;

iii fluency sufficient to participate in interaction without it breaking down.

Some students had objectives which were higher, and the teacher encouraged any effort to approximate more closely to the native speaker model. In the face of communication problems students saw the need for achieving these standards, but could also feel that they were attainable. With the resulting development of confidence in their ability students were motivated to make an effort they had been unwilling to make before.

What we mean by simulations

We also wanted to strengthen their motivation by trying to make the communication task more authentic, and for this reason too considered using simulations. How can a simulation be authentic when the word implies the pretence or imitation of another reality? In that sense our students were used to simulated language use in the classroom, for example, in drill or in comprehension exercises where the teacher tests

understanding of a text he already knows. Here we wanted the simulation to concern only the task; once the students had accepted the task, the language they used would be their own, it would be what they required to accomplish the task. We are saying that language is in one sense authentic when it is used for communication, and that most foreign language exercises of the sorts our students were used to, did not involve communication of anything felt, believed or perceived by the students. We wanted to provide a stimulus to communication, where the task would allow the students to talk as themselves.

In order to exemplify the kind of tasks set, we will describe four of the simulations used, two where the students have relative freedom to select the linguistic content, which we believe makes the task easier and therefore more conducive to building confidence, and two tasks where the appropriate language is more restricted.

1 Black Bags: put an unusual/unfamiliar object in an opaque plastic bag, with one bag for every 2 or 3 students (ones we have used include a Bell & Howell flat pin electric adaptor with 10 cm earth lead and a Glog nut on a swaged wire loop (used in rock-climbing)). Seal the bag. The first task for the students, divided into pairs or threes, is to write a description together of the object they can feel in the bag. The second task is to describe the object to members of another group so that they can make drawings of it. After this the objekcts are removed from the bags for inspection!

2 Scenario: each member of the class is given or shown a copy of a photograph which is ambiguous enough to permit more than one interpretation. We have used cinema stills, including one which has been interpreted as being from a

black comedy, a Sherlock Holmes story, a thriller, a horror film, a farce.... Each student is asked to think of a possible scenario for the film the picture comes from; then, in small groups, individuals discuss their ideas and choose one to develop and present to the class.

3 Problem: in small groups students are asked to find a solution to problems such as those suggested by Edward de Bono (e.g. 1967, p.9).

4 Lego instructions: this is an idea we owe to Richard Allwright. Small groups of students are asked to write instructions for assembling Lego models (the manufacturer supplies pictorial instruction) and another group test the instructions by trying to assemble the model.

Simulations v Role-play

For a number of reasons we have found such simulations preferable to role-play for the objectives we had. An immediate difference between role-play and simulation is that in the former there are two elements of fantasy - task and persona - and in the latter, only one - task. The greater specificity of the task has ensured rapid involvement on the part of students, an element which in our view is necessary to ensure authentic communication. The task, however absurd at first glance - why write instructions for assembling children's toys? -, is real and does not demand special knowledge of the world which the student may not have, such as marketing techniques. There is no element of psycho-drama in that the students are allowed at all times to be themselves, and do not have to try to imagine themselves as dyspeptic businessmen when they are young and feminine. We seem to have encountered more students who were content to be themselves than those who are supposed to want to shelter behind the guise of another

persona in the foreign language classroom. There is no immediate tension evident in any of the tasks we have set, and it seems important that the tasks are not too difficult and that the students can feel at the end of a class that they have come fairly close to what was asked of them. This has not been found to be closely limited by linguistics knowledge. Because they involve fewer people than role-plays we are familiar with, more reluctant, shyer students join in more readily.

There are further points which differentiate such simulations from role-play. The key to most role-plays seems to be conflict in one form or another which is present from the start and needs to be resolved. Consequently the dominant language function is suasion, whereas the more varied contexts of the simulation tasks require description, instruction, explanation, querying, and requests, as well as some of the agreement and disagreement used in role-play. Role-play tends to put a premium on personality and on character-acting; there is a personal implication which some students want to avoid, and we feel that a consequent refusal to participate must be respected.

Simulations do not demand the same commitment because less is imposed from outside, involvement is generated more from within the group. Like role-play, simulations encourage linguistic independence from the teacher, and more student interdependence. Learning to be a participant in a small group interaction where its members have equal or nearly equal status is firstly only possible if the teacher is outside it, and secondly much easier if it takes place in an atmosphere of collaboration rather than of conflict. Co-operative effort demands participation, and consequently encourages turn-taking in the interaction. Each group member feels a certain responsibility to contribute and to being

understood; if they are not understood the context allows time for reconsideration and restatement, and the spirit of small group interaction demands it, wheras the larger groups required by role-plays seem to discourage it. After all, meetings can be daunting occasions for native speakers, so when used to practise foreign language skills they seem less calculated to give or build up the learner's confidence to make active use of passive knowledge than simulations.

The teacher's role

Some of the above remarks raise the question of what we think the teacher's role is when using simulations. We see it much more as that of classroom manager than of instructor, with the task of ensuring productive activity. The student's behaviour in the classroom had been totally teacher-dominated and to begin with they were incapable of addressing a remark to anyone else, even when another student was their interlocutor. The teacher needs to support and encourage the student's moves toward independence in their linguistic behaviour and more reliance on the shared knowledge of the group. This meant taking every opportunity to stimulate more effort and search in the student's exploration of their knowledge; on occasion it meant helping students overcome a blockage in communication by supplying a word or phrase when prompting did not lead them to it, but this was done as little as possible. Teacher input at the beginning of a class was kept to even less than the minimum that appeared necessary; the most useful and productive contribution from the teacher came at the end of the activity in assessing what had been done, serving as an arbitrator over breakdown, and as a reference source for linguistic knowledge (of Community Language Learning in, for example, Stevick 1976, ch 8).

Conclusion

In conclusion it seems important to mention some of the limitations encountered. So far the apparent absurdity of some of the tasks has not put off any of the students we have taught, although the activities have been rejected by students with a teacher who was sceptical about their value herself. As in any group activity a dominant personality can take over much of the interaction, to the extent that a more accurate user of the language will be overruled, but this does not necessarily work against the aim of building confidence. We would like to devise activities which would extend the range of language functions required, and vary those used from activity to activity, much the same criticism as we have made of role-play. The mood of classes appears too steady and relaxed to some teachers, although it can range from laughter to anger; it seems more important that in them the students are at ease and involved. So far they have found the activities enjoyable and successful, which seem to us to be the ultimate criteria in evaluating them.

References

Allwright, R. "Language learning through communication practice"; ELT DOCUMENTS 76/3 British Council

de Bono, E. The Use of Lateral Thinking; Penguin 1967

Stevick, E.W. MEMORY, MEANING & METHOD; Newbury House 1976